

Sermon - Advent Sunday (Year C) 2018

WHEN MY CHILDREN WERE YOUNG, THEY ALWAYS LOVED HAVING AN ADVENT CALENDAR, AS INDEED DO MY GRANDCHILDREN. I REMEMBER THEIR EXCITEMENT EACH MORNING, AS THEY OPENED THE APPROPRIATE DOOR OR WINDOW TO SEE WHAT WOULD BE INSIDE.

NOWADAYS THEY MAY CONTAIN CHOCOLATES, OR AS I RECENTLY SAW ADVERTISED SPECIALIST TEAS – ONE TEA BAG FOR EACH DAY LEADING UP TO CHRISTMAS. A FAR CRY FROM THE ORIGINAL CALENDARS.

TODAY IS THE 1ST SUNDAY IN ADVENT. THE WORD ‘ADVENT’ MEANS ‘COMING’. IN OTHER WORDS THERE IS AN EXPECTATION THAT SOMETHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN AND EVEN TODAY I STILL GET A SENSE OF EXCITEMENT AND ANTICIPATION KNOWING THIS IS THE TIME TO BEGIN TO PREPARE FOR THE COMING OF GOD’S SON INTO THE WORLD. FOR CHRISTIANS, ADVENT, RATHER LIKE LENT, IS A TIME OF PREPARATION AND RENEWAL. IT’S A TIME TO TAKE STOCK OF ONE’S LIFE AND SEE WHERE WE ARE GOING ON OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY. THE ADVENT SEASON IN OUR CULTURE

IS A TIME FOR MANY CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS. AND WE CERTAINLY DO NOT EXPECT TO HEAR ABOUT THE END DAYS AS WE DO, IN LUKE'S GOSPEL, WHEN WE ARE BUSY GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS.

IN OUR READING FROM JEREMIAH, THE PROPHET IS SPEAKING TO ADDRESS A DIRE SITUATION. THE ARMIES OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR, THE KING OF BABYLON, ARE ADVANCING ON JERUSALEM. THE CITY IS DOOMED. JEREMIAH'S MANY PROPHECIES ARE COMING TRUE. YET NOW, IN THE MIDST OF CATASTROPHE, THE PROPHET FINALLY SPEAKS WORDS OF PROMISE!

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER HE HAS PURCHASED A PIECE OF LAND, A FOOLISH THING TO DO YOU MIGHT THINK, IN A COUNTRY SOON TO BE CONQUERED. NEVERTHELESS, HE HAS PURCHASED THE LAND AS A PLEDGE, "FOR THUS SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS, THE GOD OF ISRAEL. HOUSES AND FIELDS AND VINEYARDS SHALL AGAIN BE BOUGHT IN THIS LAND". IN THE MIDST OF IMPENDING DOOM A SIGN OF HOPE IS ENACTED.

WHEN WE READ THAT A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH WILL SPRING UP FROM THE LINE OF DAVID, WE CANNOT HELP BUT THINK OF THE COMING MESSIAH. WE HAVE A SIMILAR IMAGE IN ISAIAH CH.11.1 – A SHOOT SHALL COME OUT FROM THE STUMP OF JESSE.

THE IMAGE IS ONE OF HOPE AND UNEXPECTED JOY. NEW LIFE SPRINGING FROM WHAT LOOKS LIKE A DEAD STUMP. TO A PEOPLE DEVASTATED BY LOSS, JEREMIAH'S PROPHECY OFFERED HOPE. ALL MAY SEEM LOST, BUT GOD IS STILL FAITHFUL. THE HOUSE OF DAVID MIGHT BE CUT DOWN, BUT GOD IS STILL ABLE TO BRING LIFE OUT OF DEATH.

WE TOO ARE CALLED TO SPEAK A WORD OF HOPE AND PROMISE IN A WORLD OFTEN FILLED WITH FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY, EVEN DESPAIR. IN THIS SEASON OF ADVENT WE SPEAK WORDS OF HOPE. IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS, LIGHT IS ABOUT TO BREAK THROUGH. IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR, HOPE ERUPTS. THE COMPLETE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISES HAS NOT YET HAPPENED BUT IT IS COMING. JEREMIAH IS SPEAKING AT A TIME PRIOR TO THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM, WHEN THE TEMPLE AND THE

WHOLE CITY WILL LIE IN RUINS AND THE PEOPLE TAKEN INTO EXILE. HIS PROPHECY ABOUT THE COMING MESSIAH WOULDN'T BE REALISED FOR ANOTHER 600 YEARS.

HOWEVER, IN OUR READING FROM LUKE, THIS PROPHECY HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN THE PERSON OF JESUS, WHO IS TALKING ABOUT EVENTS FORESHADOWING THE END OF TIMES. SO THERE ARE DARK OVERTONES IN BOTH OUR READINGS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, JEREMIAH HAS A JOYFUL EXPECTANCY AND CHRIST ASSURES US THAT IN THE END GOOD WILL TRIUMPH.

SO TODAY IS FILLED WITH A SENSE OF EXPECTANCY. THE PROMISE IS THERE AND STANDS SECURE, AND GOD, BEING FAITHFUL, WILL KEEP THAT PROMISE.

THIS WEEK'S READINGS SPEAK TO THE DEEP-SEATED LONGINGS OF US ALL, FOR RIGHT AND JUSTICE TO TRIUMPH. THEY SPEAK TO OUR YEARNING FOR A FINAL END TO ALL THE CRUELTY AND MISERY IN THE WORLD. OF COURSE IT IS SERIOUS AND SOMBRE, TO BE CONSIDERING THE END OF THE UNIVERSE AS WE KNOW IT, AND IT IS NECESSARY TO BE

REMINDED OF OUR NEED TO BE READY AND PREPARED BY
THE KIND OF LIFE WE ARE LEADING.

THE ADVENT TIMES OF OUR LIFE ARE TIMES OF WAITING. IN
ADVENT WE LIVE BETWEEN WHAT WAS AND WHAT WILL BE.
THEY ARE TIMES OF TRANSITION, AND IT IS HARD, EVEN
IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE THE WAY FORWARD. ADVENT INVITES
US TO RECEIVE GOD, WHO COMES TO US IN THE DARKNESS
OF LIFE. AT SOME POINT OUR WORLD FALLS APART. MORE
OFTEN WE SEE THIS AS THE END.

WHEN THESE THINGS HAPPEN JESUS SAYS “LOOK AT THE FIG
TREE AND ALL THE TREES, AS SOON AS THEY SPROUT
LEAVES, YOU CAN SEE FOR YOURSELVES AND KNOW THAT
SUMMER IS NEAR. SO ALSO WHEN YOU SEE THESE THINGS
TAKING PLACE, YOU KNOW THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS
NEAR”.

WE NEED TO READ THE SIGNS CORRECTLY. SO WHEN THE
DARKNESS OVERTAKES OUR LIFE, WE NEED TO KNOW THAT
WE ARE NOT ALONE BUT CHRIST IS IN THE SITUATION.
CHRIST’S PRESENCE, OUR HEALING AND SALVATION, ARE

ALWAYS TAKING PLACE IN THE DARK MESSY PARTS OF LIFE,
EVEN THOUGH WE MAY NOT BE AWARE OF IT.

‘BE ALERT AT ALL TIMES’ JESUS WARNS. HE COMMANDS US
TO ‘KEEP AWAKE’. DARKNESS IS NOT OUR ENEMY SO MUCH
AS COMPLACENCY AND FALLING ASLEEP. WE FALL ASLEEP
WHENEVER FEAR CONTROLS OUR LIFE, WHEN HOPE GIVES
WAY TO DESPAIR.

THE ADVENTS OF OUR LIFE ASK US TO TRUST THE ‘COMING
ONE’ MORE THAN THE DARKNESS. IT MEANS WE MUST SIT,
LISTEN, WAIT AND WATCH – NOT EASY! AND CERTAINLY
CONTRARY TO THE WAY OF THE WORLD.

RUNNING THROUGH THE READINGS, WE ARE AWARE OF A
CLEAR, BRIGHT SHAFT OF STRONG AND EXHILARATING
HOPE. GOD HEARS THE CRY, OF THOSE WHO FIND
THEMSELVES OVERWHELMED BY THE SORROWS AND
TRAGEDIES OF LIFE.

TERRIBLE TRAGEDIES DO HAPPEN AND IT REMINDS ME OF
THE REV. JULIE NICHOLSON WHOSE DAUGHTER, JENNY, AGED

24, DIED IN THE LONDON TUBE BOMBINGS IN 2005.

EVENTUALLY SHE STEPPED DOWN AS PARISH PRIEST, AS SHE FELT UNABLE TO FORGIVE THE SUICIDE BOMBER WHO HAD CAUSED THE DEATH OF HER DAUGHTER. LATER SHE TOOK UP A JOB WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY. I'M SURE WE CAN'T HELP BY BEING TOUCHED BY SUCH TRAGEDIES. I WONDER, WOULD WE BE ABLE TO FORGIVE IN SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES?

ULTIMATELY, HOWEVER, AS CHRIST HAS ALREADY SHOWN US ON THE CROSS, AND IN HIS RISEN LIFE, IT IS GOOD THAT TRIUMPHS. GOD'S HARVESTING AT THE END OF TIME, WILL BE A GLORIOUS CELEBRATION OF ALL THAT IS JUST, RIGHT AND LOVING. THIS IS NOT SIMPLY WISHFUL THINKING, BUT HOPE IN ALL ITS INTEGRITY.

TODAY, WE BEGIN TO ANTICIPATE THE 'COMING' OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS. BUT IN ORDER TO PREPARE FOR NEW BIRTH WITHIN OURSELVES, WE NEED TO PRAY THAT GOD WILL DO SOMETHING NEW IN OUR LIVES AND AWAKEN US FROM OUR COMPLACENT SLEEP. WE LIVE IN A SECULAR WORLD SHROUDED IN THE DARKNESS OF UNBELIEF, BUT WE HAVE

ACCEPTED THE LIGHT THAT ENLIGHTENS ALL MEN (JOHN.1.9)
AND WE MUST ALLOW IT TO PENETRATE OUR DARKNESS. TO
HEAL AND RESTORE US, SO THAT WE IN TURN CAN BECOME
LIGHTS IN THE WORLD.

SO DURING THESE 4 WEEKS THAT LEAD UP TO CHRISTMAS,
LET US PRAY FOR A NEW AWAKENING TO GOD'S PRESENCE
WITHIN EACH ONE OF US. LET US LEARN TO SEE HIM,
RECOGNISE HIS VOICE AND LISTEN TO HIM, AS WE ARE LED
INTO A DEEPER AND MORE MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP
WITH HIM.

AMEN.